

Forget the Deeps and Row!

Chris Fraser

University of Hong Kong

What interferes with learning and performing skills well? The *Zhuāngzǐ* story of the ferryman who steers a sampan through treacherous deeps with preternatural skill highlights one crucial factor: anxiety. Managing or eliminating anxiety is a pivotal step in acquiring and performing skills and, the discursive context of the story suggests, in living a flourishing life. To fare well, in life as in boat-handling, we must learn to forget the deeps and row.

The ferryman is one of several skill stories included in *Zhuāngzǐ* book 19, a collection of short writings that an unknown ancient editor entitled “Mastering Life” (*Dá Shēng* 達生), borrowing the first two words of the brief essay with which the book begins. The story was probably included under this theme because in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, performance anxiety has a broader significance than merely how to pilot a sampan safely. One aim of this chapter is to explore how salient motifs in the ferryman story illustrate broader themes in Zhuangist ethics concerning the flourishing life. The main such theme from the ferryman is that adept performance in any field rests partly on psychological attitudes. To perform well, agents must overcome fears or worries about their circumstances and the stakes of their action—no matter how dangerous or intimidating—and focus on the task before them. By doing so, as I will explain, they may experience an efficacious and fulfilling mode of agency characteristic of one Zhuangist vision of the well-lived life.

Since managing one’s emotions is crucial both to skills and to the good life, a second aim of the chapter is to examine what guidance the ferryman and thematically related passages offer about exactly how to overcome anxiety. I will suggest that the texts collectively present two complementary approaches. One is to focus attention on the task at

hand, leaving no room for extraneous concerns; the other is to defuse potential sources of anxiety by reframing our view of what matters. Is this guidance persuasive? I suggest it can be, provided we understand it as an attractive ideal, not an imperative one.

Before examining the ferryman story in detail, let me briefly explain the approach to reading the *Zhuāngzǐ* pursued here. My discussion accepts the results of recent philological research arguing that the *Zhuāngzǐ* is a diverse anthology of brief writings of unknown authorship, probably composed over many decades, and most likely written, edited, and compiled by a variety of hands.¹ One important implication of this research is that the writings in the so-called “inner” books (*piān* 篇) have no privileged authorial, historical, or doctrinal status. Material from books such as “Mastering Life,” a so-called “outer” book, may be as informative and valuable in understanding important strands in Zhuangist discourse as the “inner” books are. Another implication is that neither the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a whole, nor the seven “inner” books, nor even the individual books themselves constitute unified works. With few exceptions,² even at the level of the individual “book,” we are interpreting collections of discrete, short writings, which may relate to each other in various ways.

Given these features of the source material, I approach the individual passages that make up the *Zhuāngzǐ* as discrete contributions to a range of loosely coherent discourses which overlap and intersect with each other in various respects. The specific relation between any particular pair or set of passages is an open question, to be explained through interpretive work. A provisional hypothesis adopted here is that the skill stories and other *Zhuāngzǐ* material bearing on agency and performance are parts of a broad discourse addressing how

¹ For a compact survey of such research, see Klein, “Reading the *Zhuangzi*.”

² The two obvious exceptions are book 30, “A Persuasion on Swords,” and 31, “The Fisherman.”

agents can transform themselves to live more adeptly. In the discussion that follows, I will explore how ideas that different passages contribute to this discourse might be combined to form a hypothetical aggregate position. Such a position is not intended to represent the unified or overall standpoint of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, however, for the texts are simply not organized in such a way as to present such a standpoint. It is simply one way of weaving together Zhuangist ideas to form a position that may be philosophically instructive.

1. The Ferryman

The ferryman story is presented as an exchange between the literary figures of Confucius and Yán Yuán, Confucius's favorite student. Yán asks Confucius to explain the cryptic remarks a skilled ferryman made to him once while crossing a famously intimidating stretch of water.

Yán Yuán asked of Confucius, "I once crossed the depths at Goblet Deeps. The ferryman handled the boat like a spirit. I asked him, 'Handling a boat, can it be learned?' He said, 'It can. Good swimmers are quickly able, and as to divers, without having seen a boat, they can handle one.' I asked him about this but he didn't tell me. May I ask, what was he referring to?"

Confucius said, "Good swimmers are quickly able—it's that they forget the water. As to divers' handling a boat without ever seeing one—they regard the depths as like land and the boat's capsizing as like their cart rolling backward. Boats could capsize and carts roll backward all around them without it penetrating their chest. Where could they go and not be at ease?"

"Shooting for tiles, you're skilled. Shooting for silver buckles, you're uneasy. Shooting for gold, you're flustered. Your skill's the same, but there's something you're

worried about—this is putting weight on the external. Anyone who puts weight on the external gets clumsy with the internal.” (19/22–26)³

The passage is primarily about anxiety and its effects on performance. Most likely, many people at the time—probably including Yán—could not swim and were distressed at the thought of falling off the ferry sampan into the deeps. To a fearful passenger such as Yán, the aplomb with which the ferryman perched on the stern, steering and sculling with the single oar, would have seemed astonishing, even superhuman.

Whether the ferryman’s performance is indeed beyond the reach of normal people is precisely the point of Yán’s question. Is his spirit-like skill due to innate, exceptional features that set him apart, or is boat-handling something others can learn? The ferryman’s answer suggests that many of us could achieve a similarly high level of competence. Those who are comfortable in the water can easily learn boat-handling, he says, while those truly at home in the water probably grasp it already. To be sure, the latter claim seems an exaggeration. Expertise in swimming underwater may be relevant to boat-handling, but it hardly translates directly into proficiency. Still, perhaps the point is the plausible one that being at home in a situation is a crucial prerequisite for acquiring related skills—and it could be true that, without having seen a boat, expert divers can teach themselves how to steer one.

In itself, the ferryman’s remark could be taken to concern only familiarity with the water and how to move around in it. But Confucius’s exposition gives it a psychological twist, tying ease of learning to the absence of anxiety. Good swimmers can learn

³ References to the *Zhuāngzǐ* text cite book and line numbers in Hung, ed., *A Concordance to Zhuāngzǐ*. These indices can be used to find the passages cited through the online concordance tool at the Chinese Text Project, edited by Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/tools/concordance>.

boat-handling quickly, he says, because they forget the water, which for non-swimmers looms as an omnipresent, overwhelming object of fear. Clearly, this forgetting cannot imply being oblivious to or unheeding of the water. Expert swimmers are acutely sensitive to the water as they pull against and glide through it. The point is rather that good swimmers are unconcerned by the water. They forget about it in that they don't attend to it as a source of anxiety. Worries about it don't enter their mind.⁴

Confucius's description of divers explains one reason the adept can forget about what for novices is an oppressive source of fear. They are wholly at ease with the circumstances in which they perform their skill. Conditions that intimidate others are as unstressful to them as their home environment. A boat capsizing is a minor inconvenience, not a life-threatening calamity, so the possibility of an accident doesn't unsettle them. They calmly proceed with the task at hand, their psychological equilibrium undisturbed.

The final paragraph generalizes Confucius's point about anxiety and performance. The higher the stakes, the more anxious participants in an archery competition tend to become, and the more their performance suffers, because they worry about the prize—what's "external" or extraneous—rather than attending to the task at hand. The result is that for them the "internal" becomes clumsy—they lose their composure and blunder in what they're doing.

The gist of the passage, then, is that attaching importance to things extraneous to our actual performance renders us inept and ill at ease, because—unlike expert swimmers and divers—we attend to, rather than forget, potential sources of anxiety. The implication is that

⁴ Vavra, "Skilful Practice," 214, agrees that forgetting the water amounts to "getting rid of fear" but maintains—implausibly, in my view—that forgetting rules out any awareness of the water.

if we can forget or unweight sources of stress external to a task, we can relax and perform at our best, learning skills and perhaps progressing to spirit-like competence.

The ferryman passage makes two prominent, complementary claims: putting weight on the external produces clumsiness, and good swimmers avoid this because they “forget the water.” The passage interweaves these two themes with several other motifs that recur prominently in Zhuangist discourse about skilled performance and living well. These include the depiction of skilled adepts as at ease in all circumstances, the link between ease and the agent being unaffected by stressful events, and the spirit-like character of the agent’s performance. The next several sections explore the two main claims and the implications of these other motifs.

2. Worrying about the External

Given the structure of the ferryman passage, its main point is the concluding slogan, based on the example of increasingly high-stakes archery competitions: “Anyone who puts weight on the external gets clumsy with the internal.”

The word “internal” (*nèi* 内) here is often taken to refer specifically to the performer’s psychological state or the heart.⁵ By implication, the word “external” (*wài* 外) then refers to whatever is outside the agent’s heart. On this interpretation, the import of the slogan is that attaching too much importance to matters external to a healthy psychological equilibrium, such as the material consequences of our actions, disrupts our internal functioning. The internal being clumsy refers to how, in the archery example, shooters become increasingly

⁵ Most commentators seem to interpret *nèi* this way. For example, Chén (*Zhuāngzǐ*, 553, n. 11) and Lǐ (*Zhuāngzǐ*, 360, n. 47) both read it as “the heart within” (*nèi xīn* 内心), most likely following the medieval commentator Chéng Xuányīng (see Guō, *Collected*, 644, n. 6). Wáng (*Collated*, 685, n. 13) interprets it as “the heart-intent” (*xīn zhì* 心志).

nervous and flustered as their worries intensify over the increasingly valuable prizes. Since the example specifically mentions psychological states—being uneasy or worried and flustered or disconcerted—the psychological reading offers a plausible interpretation of at least one dimension of the internal/external contrast.

The import of the slogan probably goes beyond this interpretation, however. In Classical Chinese, the *nèi/wài* contrast has a wide semantic scope, and the precise reference of these paired terms depends heavily on context. Generally, what is *nèi* (internal) can be whatever is core, primary, or vital versus what is peripheral, secondary, or relatively insignificant. So the slogan can also be read in a general sense as implying that anyone who places undue weight on what is secondary becomes clumsy at what is important. More specifically, in the ferryman passage, *nèi* probably refers principally to one's performance in the task at hand. The notion of putting weight on what is *wài* (external) is introduced as an explanatory label for cases in which, although our level of skill hasn't changed, our performance suffers because we're worrying about something extraneous—namely, the silver and gold. The specific contrast invoked by the *nèi/wài* pair is thus between our poor performance and the prizes. A reasonable inference is that what is *nèi* is our performance, along with anything directly pertinent to it. So the internal being clumsy refers simply to blundering the matter at hand.

These three ways of interpreting *nèi* largely converge. On the assumption that the activity we are engaged in is significant to us, the general interpretation—what's vital or important—picks out the same referent as the specific interpretation in the ferryman passage—namely, our performance in archery. Since the major theme of the passage is that psychological composure is crucial for competent performance, the psychological interpretation too surely picks out an important aspect of “internal clumsiness.” However,

there is no reason to think one's psychological state is the whole story. Proficient technical execution of one's skill is also needed, for example.

The passage presents "putting weight on the external" as an explanation for cases in which worry or concern interferes with skill. "The external" thus refers to sources of anxiety. The implication is that to avoid anxiety, we need to remove the weight we attach to the external. The implicit proposal is that we can unweight the external by "forgetting" it.

3. Forgetting the Water

What, then, is "forgetting"? Forgetting (*wàng* 忘) is a pivotal notion in numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages that treat personal cultivation and adept performance, which collectively present several distinct dimensions or conceptions of forgetting. Since this chapter focuses specifically on the ferryman passage, I will consider only aspects of forgetting directly relevant to the passage's implications about expert swimmers and nervous archers.⁶

In the ferryman story, swimmers and divers forget the water in the sense that it doesn't weigh on their minds as a source of anxiety. But they must continue to perceive it, for they need to feel and react to it in order to swim. So forgetting something, in the sense intended here, cannot entail being insensible or blind to it. Rather, as the description of divers shows, forgetting is associated with being comfortable, at home, unworried, and competent.⁷ Swimmers and divers perceive the water, but it isn't a focus of worry for them. So in learning

⁶ Fraser, "Heart-Fasting," 205–208, presents a broader account of forgetting.

⁷ Oshima suggests that perhaps forgetting might just be "some sort of contentment or at-homeness resulting from a lack of conscious concern" ("Metaphorical Analysis," 67). Kohn proposes that the psychological state referred to by *wàng* is better interpreted as "never mind" than as "forget"—to *wàng* sources of anxiety is to override them by focusing on more important values ("Forget or Not Forget," 180).

boat-handling they place no weight on the external, here understood as the risk of falling into the water.

A passage coupled with another skill story, that of Artisan Chuí, introduces a further dimension of forgetting that overlaps the case of expert divers who are comfortable in the water. We forget things, the passage declares, when they fit well. They create no discomfort or impediment to smooth functioning and hence draw no attention. “Forgetting your feet is your shoes fitting well; forgetting your waist is your belt fitting well; your awareness forgetting right and wrong is your heart fitting well.” More generally, when we achieve “good fit with affairs and encounters,” we “neither alternate internally nor follow along externally” (19/62–63). As in the ferryman story, if we fully fit into our circumstances, as the divers do, nothing extraneous can pull us off balance.

In another respect, the belt and shoe examples might seem to contrast with that of forgetting the water. Swimmers cannot be oblivious to the water, I suggested, since they must feel it to swim. By contrast, it might seem that we do become oblivious to a well-fitting belt or shoes. They seem to slip from awareness, reemerging again only if they cease to fit or we deliberately attend to them. Might expert swimmers forget the water as we forget a comfortable pair of shoes? Might this mean they are indeed oblivious to it?⁸

Without question, swimmers may fit into their watery environment extremely well—perhaps as well as we fit into comfortable shoes. But in both cases, I suggest, we retain

⁸ This seems to be Coutinho’s view. With reference to the ferryman passage, he comments that “one is thoroughly at home in a medium only when one simply lives through it, oblivious of its presence” (*Daoist Philosophies*, 186). Similarly, Vavra takes the passage to imply that skillful action requires that a swimmer or ferry pilot be unaware of the water (“Skillful Practice,” 214).

peripheral awareness of the objects we interact with—the water, the shoes, the ground we use the shoes to walk on. We do not genuinely become oblivious to these objects. To the contrary, the more comfortable or at home we are with something, the more sensitive we are to it. Expert swimmers or runners feel the flow of the water or the shape of the ground more keenly than novices do. Hence I suggest that forgetting, in a sense that covers both the swimmers and the shoes, pertains not to perception or heedfulness but to attention, particularly attention associated with anxiety or disturbance. Expert swimmers perceive the water without specifically attending to it; worried archers cannot stop nervously attending to the prizes and so are clumsy. Well-fitting shoes are comfortable, cause no disruption, and so draw no attention.

The proposal that forgetting pertains mainly to attention also helps to explain an important difference between the swimming and archery examples. Not all forgetting of fears or distractions can be due to comfort or good fit in the way that, for example, expert swimmers might forget fear of the water because of how comfortably they fit into the watery environment. Seasoned archery competitors who forget the prizes do so not by achieving good fit with them but by setting thoughts of them aside to concentrate on their shooting. They devote no attention to them.

The belt and shoes examples are paired with a description of Artisan Chuí, who could draw perfect circles or squares because he let his fingers transform with things without his heart examining his actions, thus keeping his “spirit platform” (the chest) unified and unfettered (19/62). Perhaps, because Chuí’s fingers fit so well with things, his heart had no need to attend to them. The implication is that good fit and forgetting occur when action need not be monitored or supervised by the heart, normally regarded in early Chinese thought as the organ of cognition and action guidance. This interpretation coheres well with conceiving of forgetting as an absence of attention, since it is the heart that attends to things. A tentative

implication of the Chuí story is that masterful performance proceeds not from the heart but from a unified, unimpeded spirit. I will suggest below that this description reflects an important view in Zhuangist discourse about the locus of adept agency.

When stress-inducing matters are wholly extraneous to performance of a skill, perhaps forgetting could indeed entail becoming oblivious to them, at least temporarily. This point is illustrated by Qing the woodcarver, who sculpts bell-stands of uncanny beauty (19/55–59). Before starting a new piece, Qing fasts for seven days to still his heart by emptying it of distractions. Step by step, all thoughts of praise or reward, rank or salary, honor or condemnation, and skill or clumsiness slip away. Ultimately, he claims, he forgets even his limbs and body. Emptying himself of these sources of potential interference, he suggests, allows him to “match nature with nature,” aligning his natural capacities and fully concentrated skill with the natural grain of the finest timber. To commence work, of course, Qing must recover cognitive awareness of the aim of his project and kinaesthetic awareness of his limbs. But perhaps he might really become wholly unmindful of factors such as praise or criticism. He does not cease to think or be aware—he still critically evaluates the quality of the timber, for example. But he lets extraneous concerns vanish, such that his skill becomes fully focused and attuned to its object. Arguably, what he describes is a process of removing attention from irrelevant matters and focusing it more fully on what he is doing.

4. From Forgetting to Spirit-Driven Action

Motifs associated with forgetting in the ferryman story link the concept not just to skill but to other traits characteristic of the Zhuangist sage or adept and the well-lived life. They also hint at a complex conception of adept agency distinctive of Zhuangist discourse.

One such motif is ease. Good swimmers and divers forget the water because they are deeply at ease in it, Confucius says. This description is echoed in the story of the whitewater swimmer who deftly glides through rapids too treacherous even for fish and turtles. Having

grown up in the water, the swimmer says, he is at peace in it. Gliding along with the flow is second nature to him (19/52–54). The swimmer and Confucius use different words for being at ease—*ān* 安 (at peace) versus *xiá* 暇 (at leisure)—but both descriptions evoke characterizations elsewhere in the *Zhuāngzǐ* of exemplary agents as maintaining serenity in stressful circumstances.⁹ A salient example is Zǐyú, a man struck with a disfiguring, fatal disease, whose “heart was at leisure (*xián* 閒), without anything amiss” (6/49). Gain and loss follow from inevitably changing circumstances, Zǐyú remarks; the adept is “at peace (*ān*) with the times while dwelling in the flow” and is thus “released from bonds” rather than tied down to things (6/52–53)—as we are tied down when we put weight on the external.

A related motif shared with the ferryman is that agents who achieve this sort of ease maintain equanimity by becoming impervious to disruptive emotions: “sorrow and delight cannot penetrate them” (6/52). A view found across numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages is that psychological disturbances occur when stressful events or emotions they incite penetrate the chest or heart and disrupt the equilibrium of the spirit (*shén* 神) or vital vapor (*qì* 氣) in the center of the body. Hence Confucius describes divers as so at ease that boat and cart accidents are unable to penetrate their chest—literally, their “dwelling” (*shè* 舍)—where the heart is and the spirit resides. The imagery of the adept or the person of *dé* 德 (power, agency) being impenetrable by such disturbances is common in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.¹⁰ Of particular note is an association some passages draw between affective imperviousness and the wholeness or integrity of the spirit (*shén*)—the source of psychological functioning and agency—within the chest. For example, those whose “spirit is whole” are said to have no

⁹ See, for example, 3/17–19, 4/43, and 5/20.

¹⁰ See, for example, 3/18, 5/43–45, 15/9–10, 19/7–17, and 21/30–35.

gaps or fissures through which things can get in to disrupt them, and so “death or life, shock or fear do not penetrate their chests” (19/12–14).

Such references to the spirit highlight a third motif that, as I will explain, draws the others together: Yán Yuán’s description of the ferryman’s boat-handling as “like a spirit (*shén*).” The ferryman is one of several passages that associate skilled expertise with the efficacy of spirits or ghosts. In the story of the whitewater swimmer, Confucius initially mistakes the swimmer for a ghost (19/51). The woodcarver Qìng’s works are so striking that viewers are astounded, as if they’d seen a ghost or spirit (19/55). Elsewhere, the perfected person is said to be spirit-like (*shén*) (2/71), and indeed one synonym for the perfected or sagely person is the “spirit-person” (1/22). Besides denoting the vital spirit within human beings, the word *shén* can also refer to superhuman denizens of the cosmos, who are in effect personified agents of Heaven or Nature (*tiān* 天) and so directly reflect the workings of nature. By extension, *shén* is also used to describe the wondrously efficacious agency characteristic of spirits or of Heaven. Thus one implication of the comparison of skilled performances to the agency of ghosts or spirits is that through skills we can approach a perfected mode of activity in which our actions align fully with the natural world.

Beyond this point, I want to suggest that the three distinct uses of *shén*—referring to the vital spirit in human agents, superhuman entities, and spirit-like efficacy—may be interrelated in a way that can help explain how agents act from a state of forgetting, why such action is marked by affective ease and equanimity, and why it is considered singularly efficacious.

One plausible hypothesis is that concentration and wholeness of the *shén* within—achieved by forgetting extraneous distractions—yield equanimity and facilitate spirit-like levels of performance. Another skill story in “Mastering Life” depicts a hunchback who uses a sticky pole to lift cicadas from trees as deftly as if plucking them with his hand.

He attributes this feat partly to his intense stillness and concentration, through which he disregards all the myriad things to focus only on cicada wings, to which he lightly sticks the end of the pole (19/20). Confucius describes him as unifying his intent so well that his *shén* is “condensed” (19/21). Concentration of the *shén* thus facilitates feats of skill.

Given that the *shén* forms part of our psychological make-up, it is only a short step from the hypothesis that a concentrated *shén* facilitates performance to a view presented by Cook Dīng the butcher, the most well-known of the *Zhuāngzǐ* skill exemplars. Having reached a high level of expertise, Dīng says, “I meet the oxen with my *shén*, without looking with my eyes; perceptual knowing ceases, while *shén*-impulse proceeds” (3/6). At advanced levels of skill, according to Dīng, the *shén* itself can drive action.

Drawing on this idea, let me suggest a view that goes beyond the conception of *shén* as spirit-like efficacy in the ferryman passage yet may elucidate the notion of forgetting that is the passage’s main theme. The view is that efficacious performance and closer attunement to nature can be attained by learning to act from our *shén*, an advanced mode or source of agency that functions most fully when we forget—that is, when we cease using the heart (*xīn* 心) to deliberately attend to or self-consciously control what we are doing.¹¹ Passages such

¹¹ Puett, “Notion of Spirit,” 256, suggests the Cook Dīng story implies that the impulses of the *shén* produce action that accords with the patterns of nature. Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 199–201, also regards *shén* as a “normatively positive instantiation of the self” that has a special connection to nature and *dào*. Vavra, “Skilful Practice,” 217, questions this link between *shén* as a locus of agency and nature, as he finds that individual passages tend to use *shén* and *tiān* 天 (nature) in contrasting ways (207–209). Without denying the significant differences between passages, I suggest that the conceptual associations between the *shén* within agents, the *shén*-like qualities of skilled action, and the *shén*’s responsiveness

as the Artisan Chuí and woodcarver Qìng stories suggest that adept action follows from stilling or purging the heart. *Shén* may be a label for the dimension of agency that then takes over. Mastering skills is a process of expanding the scope of activity that issues from the *shén* rather than being deliberately directed by the heart.¹²

This set of ideas provides a plausible explanation of how good swimmers can forget the water without becoming oblivious to it. The explanation is that forgetting pertains to the heart, while expert performance issues mainly from the *shén*. An expert swimmer's heart forgets the water, but the *shén* continues to respond to it sensitively and intelligently.

The web of concepts just surveyed thus suggests an intriguing composite account of expert performance. This account is not an integral doctrine attributable to any particular *Zhuāngzǐ* passage or passages, but a hypothetical stance constructed from elements partly shared across various passages. For purposes of discussion, it represents one way of tying together ideas from Zhuangist skill discourse into a relatively fine-grained picture of high-performance action.

On this account, expert performance consists largely of spirit-driven activity. Central to this mode of activity is that, through forgetting, the heart is emptied of thoughts, judgments, plans, worries, and fears, and action issues mainly from the spirit (*shén*). Such action is marked by focused concentration; the absence of extraneous, distracting thoughts or emotions; a sense of ease or calm; and freedom from ties to things. It need not be effortless;

to natural patterns are strong enough to support the claim that action issuing from the *shén* tends to align with natural circumstances and thus be efficacious.

¹² Vavra, "Skilful Practice," 204, notes the widespread use in early Chinese texts of *shén* to refer to highly refined cognitive abilities superior to those of the heart.

for all we know, the ferryman, woodcarver, or butcher may work up quite a sweat.¹³ The relevant conception of ease is rather an absence of cares, tension, or disturbance.

Spirit-driven activity is associated with *dé*, the power of agency bestowed on us by nature, and with heightened efficacy, arising from the superior attunement to natural conditions that the spirit can achieve compared with the heart. By implication, characteristic features of spirit-driven activity are at the same time central features of the life of *dé*, or the Zhuangist good life.¹⁴

Is spirit-driven activity an intelligible conception of action? I suggest that it is, at least in outline, and we can plausibly explicate it in terms of contemporary concepts such as procedural memory and the contextual nature of basic actions. A basic action is one we

¹³ Contra Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, the *Zhuāngzǐ* skill texts do not emphasize an ideal of effortlessness—not unless we conflate “effortless” in the sense of “fluid” or “graceful” with “effortless” in the sense of “not difficult,” “without trying,” or “requiring no exertion.” Effort *per se* is generally not a central concern in early Chinese discourse on adept action.

¹⁴ Yearley proposes that for the *Zhuāngzǐ* activity issuing from the *shén* manifests the “ultimate spiritual state,” one marked by “a higher kind of ability” that allows the agent to negotiate an easy, efficacious way through the world (“Zhuangzi’s Understanding,” 176). I agree that *shén*-directed activity illustrates a Zhuangist vision of the fulfilling life. But Yearley packages this view within a framework of what he calls “inwardly mysticism” (160), according to which *shén* activity involves a transformation by “transcendent drives,” such that skilled adepts “cease to be normal agents” and are instead possessed by “an alien power” (176). This seems to me an excessively complex interpretation of the skill texts, which I read as implying that a fulfilling life is available to ordinary agents, drawing on resources they already possess and requiring no mystical transcendence.

perform without performing any further action. What counts as a basic action may be relative to an agent's competence. For a skilled typist, typing the word "action" may be a single basic action, whereas for a beginner, typing "action" might require a separate basic action for each letter, accompanied by a discrete, conscious intention to type each one. Procedural memory—popularly called muscle memory—refers to the largely unconscious memory system by which we learn and execute skills. Spirit-driven activity is in effect highly competent action in which much of the perception, judgment, and movement required has become automatic, issuing from procedural memory without self-conscious attention or guidance. In such activity, what count as basic actions for the agent may shift to a high, general level. Instead of consciously performing the separate actions of pushing off, balancing, sculling, steering, and landing, for instance, expert boat pilots may be able to simply cross the river as a single, continuous high-level action, requiring little conscious thought, guided largely by their *shén*. Such activity, I suggest, is understandable and even familiar. Many of us experience it daily while performing routine, automatic, yet intelligent actions such as driving a car or walking to the bus stop and when exercising expertise in sports, work, crafts, or the performing arts.

Taking this conception of spirit-driven activity seriously need not commit us to accepting early Chinese metaphysical views about the existence of an inner entity called the *shén*, constituted of *jīng* 精 (vital fluid) and *qì* (vital vapor). For our purposes, we can simply take *shén* to refer to whatever psycho-physiological capacities underwrite the features ascribed to spirit-driven action.¹⁵ Nor need we hold that spirit-driven activity somehow magically resolves thorny normative questions about the appropriateness of various courses

¹⁵ Coutinho (*Daoist Philosophies*, 183) and Yearley ("Zhuangzi's Understanding," 175) both recommend a similar stance.

of conduct.¹⁶ *Zhuāngzǐ* passages valorize key features of spirit-driven activity, but perhaps an agent could attain spirit-like competence while doing appalling things, as oxen no doubt hold is the case with Cook Dīng.¹⁷

Valorizing spirit-driven activity also need not entail what Montero labels the “just do it” view of skills, the popular yet generally unexamined assumption that expert-level performance is characterized by an absence of conscious thought, control, or effort (*Thought in Action*, 14). Montero draws on evidence from professional athletes, dancers, musicians, and chess players to argue that conscious mental processes such as self-reflective thinking, planning, or monitoring of one’s actions are often employed in optimal performance (*Thought in Action*, 38). Some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages may present a radical no-thought view of action (for example, 15/10–14), but not all do. The Cook Dīng story depicts interaction between spirit-driven activity and the self-conscious cognition associated with the heart. Dīng describes handling tough parts in the ox by consciously noticing and preparing for them before again applying spirit-driven capacities to work his way through: “I see the difficulty, cautiously prepare, focus my vision, and slow my action; I move the knife with great

¹⁶ Puett, “Notion of Spirit,” 259, argues that the links between spirit and Heaven imply that the Zhuangist adept with a cultivated spirit will inherently follow the proper patterns of the natural world. I am skeptical that the scope of such normative guidance extends very far. Yearley, “Zhuangzi’s Understanding,” 176, suggests that *shén*-guided activity is amoral by the measure of normal moral standards. I have argued that such activity might facilitate identifying justified ways of interacting with others but cannot ensure that we reliably follow them (Fraser, “Heart-Fasting,” 209–212).

¹⁷ Ivanhoe, “Relativist,” 202, maintains that the *Zhuāngzǐ* skill stories all concern “benign activities.” Slaughtering oxen is not benign.

subtlety, and suddenly it [the ox] has already fallen apart” (3/10–11). Spirit-driven activity could constitute the foundation or core of optimal performance without thereby leaving no role for self-aware planning, judgment, or control.

5. Learning to Forget

The concluding moral of the ferryman passage may seem obviously true: putting weight on the external—anxiously attending to factors not directly relevant to the task at hand—hampers performance. In fact, however, the relation between attention, anxiety, and performance is more complex than the passage acknowledges. An established finding in sports psychology is that attaching enough importance to a competition that an athlete experiences some degree of anxiety, along with attendant psycho-physiological arousal, tends to improve performance, not impede it. The details depend on a particular athlete’s tolerance for anxiety, the athlete’s interpretation of anxiety as facilitative (such as pleasant excitement) or debilitating (such as unpleasant stress), and the interaction between somatic anxiety (such as feeling “butterflies in the stomach,” which may be facilitative) and cognitive anxiety (such as consciously worrying about failure, which is usually debilitating).¹⁸ Moreover, to attach an appropriate degree of importance to an event and thus generate facilitative excitement about it, the athlete must understand the event’s context and its potential consequences. If, as the ferryman story implies, optimal performance requires forgetting the prizes, the relevant type of forgetting should be spirit-driven activity that takes the prizes into account without anxiously attending to or fretting over them, for they are indeed a relevant, albeit peripheral, aspect of the circumstances to which the agent is responding.

Accordingly, rather than placing no weight at all on the external, the most defensible advice may be to place proportionate weight on relevant external factors such that one feels

¹⁸ Weinberg and Gould, *Foundations*, 85–92.

an appropriate, facilitative level of excitement while remaining composed and able to perform well. The lesson of the ferryman story is more compelling if we qualify it: putting *disproportionate* weight on or attending *too anxiously* to extraneous factors hampers performance.

A crucial practical question, then, is how to avoid attaching too much weight to the external. Just how do we forget, in the relevant sense?

The swimming and diving examples suggest that one way to forget sources of anxiety is by attaining sufficient competence that we feel at ease with them. Expert swimmers and divers feel no anxiety in boat-handling because for them the consequences of failure are negligible. They know they won't be hurt if they capsize. They place little or no weight on the external—the risk of falling into the water—because it is genuinely trivial to them. The stakes are low; they encounter no appreciable source of stress. An obvious limitation of this solution to anxiety is that it applies only to those with the relevant expertise. Non-swimmers must work their way up from floating in the shallows before they can learn boat-handling in the deeps.

The archery example is not directly analogous to that of swimmers and divers. Its point is that when the stakes are indeed high, we become anxious about them, and this concern about matters extraneous to hitting the target undermines our competence. Unless we avoid contests altogether, however, we can't eliminate the stress posed by competition in the way expertise in swimming eliminates the stress posed by the water. The cost of failure—losing the gold—remains. Anxiety about the stakes can be alleviated only by changing our attitudes about them, either by devaluing them or by redirecting attention away from them. Doing so is analogous not to learning boat-handling as an expert swimmer but to learning it as a non-swimmer who has found a way to remain calm about the danger of falling overboard.

Expert swimmers and divers may illustrate what forgetting the external is like, but they are not necessarily exemplars of how to achieve such forgetting in a high-stress situation.

So what advice do *Zhuāngzǐ* writings offer about how to forget or unweight the external when external factors are unavoidably stressful? On this point, the ferryman story is silent, beyond implying that we must learn to concentrate on the matter at hand. Other passages address the issue in two ways, however, directly and as part of an overall approach to value in life.

The direct approach consists mainly of concentrating on the task at hand and by doing so directing our attention away from extraneous matters. Some passages depict this process as incorporating meditative practices to help clear the heart.

One illustration of a direct approach is the hunchback cicada-catcher's regimen for learning to pick the bugs off trees with a pole (19/18–21). He undertakes a course of incrementally more difficult exercises to hone his technique and train his ability to concentrate on the cicadas without distraction. An implication is that by following a disciplined training regimen we can learn to forget the external. Another illustration is Qing the woodcarver's practice of fasting before a new project to still his heart by clearing out extraneous thoughts. The specifics of his routine are probably inessential for our purposes; techniques other than fasting might work equally well. The crux is that he adopts a disciplined psycho-physical regimen to focus his skill and direct his attention away from concerns external to his task.

Other well-known passages concerning forgetting and emptying the heart of distractions include the story of Yán Huí making ethical progress by "sitting and forgetting" (6/89–93) and the dialogue in which Confucius admonishes Yán Huí to undertake "heart-fasting" to purge his impractical plans to reform the cruel tyrant of Wèi (4/1–34). The first story depicts Yán forgetting conventional values and norms that constitute impediments

to aligning with natural processes. The second depicts him emptying his heart of preconceived plans and instead learning to respond fluidly to circumstances by means of *qi* (vital vapor)—in effect, his *shén*. Both stories depict processes of emptying the heart of content that could weigh the agent down through attachment to the external.¹⁹

The richest direct treatment of anxiety management is Confucius’s advice to Zǐgāo, a nobleman debilitated by stress over a high-stakes diplomatic assignment. This passage presents a fourfold approach to reducing stress. One element is cognitive restructuring, as Confucius coaches Zǐgāo to see his situation as a normal, expected part of his social role, observing that from time to time familial and political relationships present all of us with inescapable troubles. Another is affective reinterpretation, as he urges Zǐgāo that the height of *dé* 德 (power, agency) lies in finding peace in circumstances he cannot control by seeing them as unchangeable features of his life circumstances (*mìng* 命), such as his age or height. A further element is preparation and confidence-building. Confucius offers practical advice on human relations and talks Zǐgāo through various scenarios he might encounter. A final, crucial point is attention training. Zǐgāo is to forget the dangers and stresses by absorbing himself in an alternative object of attention, his diplomatic work: “act on the facts of the matter and forget yourself” (4/41–44).

A second major approach to unweighting the external is to reframe the significance of success or failure so that the prospect of failure no longer induces anxiety. Consider the story of Sūnshū Áo, who was thrice elevated and then dismissed as premier of his state without feeling either honored or dismayed. Sūnshū maintains equanimity by investing value only in inherent features of the self that are independent of external influences. “Since I regard gain and loss as not me, I wasn’t upset.” “If [power and status] lie in something else, they’re not

¹⁹ For further discussion of these passages, see Fraser, “Heart-Fasting,” 202–208.

present in me; if they lie in me, they're not present in something else" (21/64–65). Sūnshū has structured his self-understanding and self-worth such that he places little or no weight on the external.

Another example is the amputee ex-convict Wáng Tái, whose “constant heart” remains unperturbed even by matters of life and death. Wáng understands how not to rely on anything, and so external things cannot pull him this way or that (5/6). Accepting the transformation of things around him as facts of his life circumstances (*mìng* 命), he focuses on “preserving his source,” or maintaining his nature-given powers of agency (5/6). To maintain a “constant heart,” he attends to the respects in which all things are parts of a totality that remains the same regardless of how its parts change or are redistributed (5/7). He thus feels no emotional distress over losing his foot, since to him the amputation is not actually a loss but merely a rearrangement of parts within a whole.

The theme of attaining constancy by identifying with things as a unity appears again in a dialogue in which Lǎo Dān describes for Confucius the free wandering of the perfected person. Such persons attach no weight to external things, instead adopting the attitude that “value lies in me and is not lost in change” (21/34). Like grazing animals or water-born creatures, they attain “overall constancy” and emotional equanimity by engaging in a flow of activity that remains consistent despite ongoing, minor changes:

Grass-eating beasts do not fret over a change of pasture; water-born creatures do not fret over a change of waters. They proceed through minor changes without losing their overall constancy, and joy, anger, grief, and happiness do not enter their chests.

(21/31–32)

How can we come to live this way? According to the passage, the crux lies in identifying with the world as a unified whole:

Now as to the world, it is that in which the myriad things are one. If you attain that in which they are one and assimilate to it, your four limbs and hundred parts will be as dust and dirt, and death and life, ending and beginning will be as day and night, nothing being able to disturb you—least of all the distinctions of gain and loss or good and bad fortune! (21/32–33)

One way to interpret these lines is as advocating that we let go of our perspective as individuals and instead identify with the cosmic standpoint of the world as a totality. Overall or high-level constancy then follows, since the totality remains the same whole despite any change or rearrangement of its parts. Once we identify with the totality, it matters little to us whether we as individuals succeed or fail in our endeavors, since from the cosmic perspective there is no net gain or loss.

Let me suggest, however, that the crux of these remarks is less to advocate that we adopt the cosmic standpoint—which may be impractically difficult—than it is to illustrate the idea of overall constancy. Consider again the analogy to grazing or water-born creatures. What they value is the ongoing activity of roaming and feeding in fields or streams. They see no difference between feeding in one place or another; what matters is the overall constancy of their activity. If we identify with the world, considered as the totality of things, we regard it as a single, vast realm within which we roam or wander about. We need not see any difference between wandering in one situation or another. What is of value is our activity, which is wholly internal to us and unaffected by change, since its overall constancy can continue regardless of our particular circumstances.²⁰

²⁰ I offer an interpretation of the Zhuangist good life along these lines in Fraser, “Emotion and Agency” and “Wandering the Way.”

On this interpretation, both the direct approach and the reframing approach hinge on focusing our intentions and self-worth on our own ongoing activity. In the direct approach, agents mitigate the influence of external factors by concentrating on the task before them. In the value-reframing approach, value is located in the ongoing flow of adaptive activity. A consequence of both approaches is that in highlighting the importance of unweighting the external, the ferryman story illustrates how the exercise of skills may foster attitudes characteristic of a more general Zhuangist conception of the good life.

6. Concluding Remarks

The ferryman story weaves together multiple motifs that are shared across numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages, thus embedding the story in a web of interrelated conceptions of personal cultivation, adept activity, and the good life. As illustrated by these motifs, feats of apparently preternatural skill can be learned, and doing so offers the possibility of achieving spirit-like attunement with the environment. Pivotal to mastering skills is the ability to forget potential sources of stress, either by becoming expert in dealing with them, directing attention away from them, or reframing one's perception of them so that they no longer intimidate. Agents who attain such forgetting become at ease with the circumstances in which their skill is performed. Disruptive, extraneous concerns no longer enter the mind, and the agent can adroitly proceed with the task, learning to act from a spirit-like mode of agency available to all of us. The result, I suggest, is an attractive depiction of an important component of mental health and of a fulfilling life.

As we have seen, the topics raised in passages in which these motifs appear reflect how, for many subdiscourses within the *Zhuāngzǐ*, skilled performances function as concrete illustrations of general themes about acting and living adeptly. Forgetting or unweighting extraneous matters, maintaining a mindset of unperturbed ease, and attending to the task at hand may facilitate spirit-like adeptness not only in skills but in the overall course of life. As

the medieval scholar Chéng Xuányīng commented about the problem of putting too much weight on the external, “How could this apply only to archery?! Everything is so.”²¹

The ferryman story focuses on the psychological side of skill performance, rather than on technique or criteria of success. The hunchback story gives examples of technique exercises; the woodcarver attributes his results to alignment between his skills and the natural pattern of the wood; the whitewater swimmer explains how he follows the course of the water. The ferryman passes over such issues. But nor does the text imply that the mental side of performance renders the technical side trivial or unnecessary. Swimmers and divers of course rely on technical skills in gliding through water; the point of the archery example is that distractions interfere with technical skill, not that mental composure alone determines success.²²

The moral of the ferryman story is limited in content yet broad in application. To do anything adeptly—boat-handling, archery, or anything else—we need to manage anxiety by

²¹ Guō, *Collected Explications*, 644, n. 6.

²² Hence I suggest Vavra exaggerates in proposing that the ferryman passage presents a conception of “universal skill” requiring only mental composure and attunement to the environment (“Skilful Practice,” 214). The reference to archery assumes that the agent already possesses the needed techniques, while swimmers and divers presumably have at least some familiarity with sculling and steering in water. Forgetting might be a crucial, near-universal element in adept performance without itself constituting a “universal skill.”

setting aside the extraneous or peripheral and directing our attention appropriately. Focus on what you're doing. Forget the deeps and row.²³

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